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DOD FOR USDP EDELMAN, ASD LONG, DASD KIMMITT

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MCAPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MURR TELLS USDP EDELMAN HE EXPECTS TO
STAY AS DEFENSE MINISTER

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman expressed to Defense Minister Elias Murr the U.S. commitment to assisting the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Murr reported that he understood from President Michel Sleiman that Sleiman would appoint him to stay on as Defense Minister in the new government. Laying out his goal to reshape the LAF to better fight terrorism, Murr said he hopes to procure Cobra helicopters and have U.S. origin equipment in the LAF's equipment to standardize training and maintenance. End summary.

2. (C) Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman, Assistant Secretary of Defense Mary Beth Long, and CENTCOM J5 Policy and Planning Director Major General Allardice met with Defense Minister Elias Murr at his home in Rabieh on May 31. CDA Sison, DCM, Defense Attache, Office of Defense Cooperation Chief, PolOff, and DOD staff were also in attendance. Edelman thanked Murr for his leadership and expressed the U.S.'s commitment to supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

MURR LIKELY TO STAY
ON AS DEFENSE MINISTER

3. (C) Saying he is optimistic, Murr said that newly-elected President Michel Sleiman is prepared to play a role different from his previous position as the LAF Commander. Briefing the delegation on his three-hour meeting with Sleiman, Murr relayed that he wishes to stay on as Defense Minister to continue what he has been working on for the past three years. Murr said he told Sleiman that this ministry is the only cabinet position he is interested in, and will "stay home" if not appointed. According to Murr, Sleiman assured Murr that he will do "anything to keep him because the LAF needs him." (Note: Sleiman told us earlier the same day that he hopes to choose the Defense and Interior Ministers, septel. End note.)

TIME TO RESHAPE THE LAF

14. (C) Murr said he wants to reshape the LAF, something which he believed could not be done before because of Syrian influence in the army. Murr wants to seize the opportunity of a new president, who is coming from the LAF, to create "a professional, light army to fight terrorists, our war for the next 10 to 15 years." Murr said he hopes to train ("need special commandos"), equip ("light to medium weapons"), and reshape the LAF, and told Sleiman that he will continue to seek U.S. assistance for what the LAF most needs. Sleiman reportedly responded, "You have a green light and I will not interfere."

15. (C) In reshaping the LAF, Murr stressed the need for "clear job descriptions." He said the LAF must protect Lebanon's border, fight terrorists, and complement the responsibilities of the Internal Security Forces (ISF). Murr shared that a short time before the meeting, the LAF had caught and killed an explosives-laden man leaving the Palestinian refugee camp Ain al-Hilweh. "The stronger the LAF, the weaker Hizballah becomes," he reasoned. Edelman informed Murr that the USG was exploring ways it can increase its assistance to the ISF. Murr stated his preference for U.S. equipment to standardize maintenance and training, adding that he has delayed accepting France's assistance offers.

COBRAS MOST DESIRED; THEIR IMAGE
IS IMPORTANT

16. (C) Expressing his desire for Cobra attack helicopters, Murr assured the delegation that the helicopters will not "fall into Hizballah's hands. No one has ever gotten a single bullet from the LAF." Murr said he planned to base the helicopters at the ISF commando compound in Dbayieh, not far from the embassy, in a Christian area, safe for landing and taking off, and strategically located in the middle of the country and on the sea. The helicopters would not be based near Beirut International Airport, he said pointedly. (During the early-May violence, Hizballah swiftly took control of BIA.)

17. (C) He said he likes Cobras because of their "intimidating" image. He also believes it sends an important message when the LAF can say, "The U.S. agreed to give Cobras to Lebanon." (Note: Murr is actually looking at a deal whereby Saudi financial assistance to Lebanon would be used to procure 12 Jordanian Cobras in a third-party transfer arrangement. End Note.) Believing the LAF will encounter another "Nahr al-Barid" in the next 12 months, Murr stated that Cobras will save LAF lives. He added that the LAF has qualified maintenance staff.

18. (C) Edelman conveyed the U.S.'s primary interest that the LAF choose helicopters which are easily maintained and do not encounter difficulties sustaining their operations. There have been problems in other countries with maintenance and sustainability. Murr responded that the GOL will have the funds to buy five years of maintenance and spare parts at the outset.

19. (C) Edelman assured Murr that his staff will move immediately on providing assistance to the LAF to ensure there is "built-in momentum" to keep the assistance program moving for the long term. Edelman confirmed that Murr believed the LAF needed 10-20 tactical UAVs, coastal patrol vessels, and secure communications if the U.S. could supply them relatively quickly. Murr expressed his appreciation for U.S. efforts, and said that the U.S. can count on the LAF to help in its war on terrorism. Murr noted that the Lebanese military is the only Arab military to have recently fought and suffered casualties, concluding that it is a strong, reliable force.

110. (C) Edelman also said that with a Lebanese president now in place, the U.S. wanted to proceed on the long-discussed initiative to establish a bilateral defense committee with Lebanon. ASD Long hopes to return to Lebanon in September to

move forward that process. Murr was enthusiastic and said he would look forward to welcoming Long, hopefully in his renewed role as Minister of Defense.

11. (U) USDP Edelman has cleared this cable.

SISON